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THE LEFT AND CRISIS IN AFRICA

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LIST OF CONTENTS

Abstract	iv
Introduction	1
Liberation Movements	1
Labour	3
Social Movements	4
The State	5
Imperialism	7
Conclusion	7

ABSTRACT

This essay is an attempt to assess some of the social forces and strategies that the Left have looked upon to provide a transformative medium in Africa. In dealing with this broad issue, the discussion centres on the following areas:

- Liberation Movements;
- Labour;
- Social Movements
- The State.

The assessment looks critically at the shortcomings of these social forces, and concludes with the need for the Left in Africa to think more creatively about strategies for socialism on the continent.

INTRODUCTION

When thinking about the problem of the Left in Africa, one is tempted to recall Brecht's sardonic comment in the midst of the Fascist crisis: "The only people who are still laughing are those who have not heard the news." Clearly the news is not good and the Gramscian motif of "pessimism of the intelligence and optimism of the will" looks like an increasingly necessary intellectual and emotional place to be.

This evaluation takes place against an economic and political crisis in Africa that has been analysed on numerous occasions, and for purposes of this discussion can be summarised as follows: At an economic level the crisis is represented by a growing debt problem, worsening terms of trade, disarray in agricultural production; lack of sustained industrialisation, and a steadily worsening condition of the popular class. In the political arena the scene is characterised by undemocratic, dependent states, and an increasing statification of politics: As Anyong-Nyongo has deftly summarised it:

The role of the state as the focal point for social cohesion and social engineering is particularly important in societies that have not had time to melt and merge into solid nations where the people have some historical and a certain collective memory which may help explain away certain conflicts and rationalise or justify political and mination. Weak and young states, lacking time-tested legal frameworks and political cultures for conflict regulation, are likely to be very brittle in attempts at conflict resolution.¹

This essay is an attempt to assess some of the social forces and strategies that the Left have looked upon to provide a transformative medium in Africa. In dealing with this broad issue, the discussion will centre on the following areas:

- Liberation Movements
- Labour
- Social Movements
- The State

I shall also examine, within this context, the fundamental constraint to change, that the Left have in differing ways identified, namely imperialism.

LIBERATION MOVEMENTS

The constraints on radical transformation and development in Africa have been compellingly persistent. In the midst of this long nightmare of underdevelopment, various alternative vehicles of transformation have been put forward, celebrated, and later criticised. The liberation movement and the theory of protracted struggle earned a deserved reputation as an important medium for radical change. The idea that a lengthy struggle could serve as a sustained educational process in which the legacy of racist,

1 Introduction to P. Anyang' Nyongo' (Ed.) – *Popular Struggles for Democracy in Africa* – U.N.U. ZED Books, 1987, p.17

exploitative relations could be challenged in practice, and new forms of consciousness and culture developed as a provision of an alternative hegemony, was an exciting, and in many ways, a fruitful, practical and theoretical challenge. Recently, however, Mandaza, amongst others, has challenged this view of protracted struggle as being a romanticised view of radicalisation, arguing that more often such liberation movements base their mobilisation on more traditional, religious, and basically nationalist positions.² Such a strategy was in many ways not so much an option, as a necessity in a colonial situation. Basil Davidson, in an analysis of the Cabral Legacy, has rightly explained that one of the many strengths of Cabral was that he had seen that:

African use of nationalism, as a weapon to get decolonisation was not an optional alternative to the use of some other weapon. There was no other weapon, or none that could have the least prospect of becoming effective... There was no other way ahead, after 1945, than the road opened to and by nationalism; and the petty-bourgeoisie, however, blinkered in the majority, was the stratum that must lead along it.³

To be sure, Cabral also understood the need to move beyond nationalism, but not without fully understanding its full importance and impact not only at a political level, but also in the cultural arena. Liberation movements, on the whole, have grown on this nationalist terrain, and do not move decidedly beyond its parameters in the post-colonial period. The Marxist discourse that characterises a certain level of rhetoric in liberation movements appears to have been initiated, but not organically integrated into the organisation, structures and common sense of the liberation struggles.

Aquino de Braganca and Jacques Depelchin have provided a useful methodological essay on the uneven experience of Frelimo's liberation struggle, noting the relationship between political preparation and military advance, and the effect in turn of rapid military advance on political organisation and mobilisation. Thus they note that while the military advances of Frelimo into Tete in 1972 were made possible by the political and ideological solidity of the liberated areas in Cabo Delgado and Niassa provinces, this military progress did not automatically imply an extension or reproduction of the liberated zones.⁴ This analysis leads De Braganca and Depelchin to question the methodology of analysing liberation movements. Thus they write:

Generally speaking, in the chronicling of victorious historiographies, it is rare to run into accounts which focus on 'less victorious' aspects. Thus in the history of the armed struggle, since the process led to victory, it is considered unnecessary to analyse, in critical manner, the content and limits of that victory: aspects of the victory which, in the future, could

2 Introduction to I. Mandaza (Ed) - *Zimbabwe: The Political Economy of Transition* - C.O.D.E.S.R.I.A., 1986.

3 B. Davidson - *On Revolutionary Nationalism: The Legacy of Cabral - Race and Class*, Winter, 1986, Vol. XXVII, No. 3, p.42

4 A. De Braganca and J. Depelchin - *From the Idealisation of Frelimo to the Understanding of the Recent History of Mozambique* - A.J.O.P.F. No. 1, 1986, p.169.

undermine or even threaten the consolidation of achieved gains are not assessed.⁵

In addition, what, was presented as persuasive argument for the necessity of armed struggle developed into an implicit acceptance of the armed struggle as the only means of struggle.

Again, according to Depelchin,⁶ from research so far undertaken on workers in Mozambique, the main task of Frelimo members among labourers, such as the railway workers, was to recruit people to be sent to the struggle in the rural areas. This in turn led to a seeming lack of a network of organisers to work among the workers, and to develop another form aimed at politicising workers. In sum, in looking at the gains, contradictions and defeats of liberation struggles, it is necessary to remember that the history of such struggles cannot be assessed by looking only at the organisational history of liberation movements; the latter have to be placed within the broader social processes that make up their milieu. Moreover, in examining the experience of liberation movements and their post-colonial records, Russell Jacoby's comments are pertinent:

Defeat is also a fact; it registers the constellation of forces, not the quality of insight, theory, and even practices. These must be elicited from the web of events; they are not simply contiguous with the defeat itself. Moreover, success and defeat are not insular realities; they partake of each other.⁷

LABOUR

In the search for alternative social forces for radical change, the category of labour has also evoked a series of images and exerted a set of compelling theoretical pressures on radical analysts. Extrapolations on consciousness and ideology have, at times, been almost logically correlated with a given relation in the production process. Michaela Von Freyhold has identified this process as follows:⁸ A statistical exercise is carried out to determine the size of the industrial or semi-industrial labour-force, followed by an exercise in theory to decide which other categories might also be considered as proletarianised, semi-proletarian, migrant or petty-bourgeois. Then an inventory is taken of the forms of struggle in which the 'working class' engages and an assessment is made of whether these may or may not imply a proletarian consciousness, whether they have recently advanced to a trade union type of consciousness or are still stuck at this level. The concluding observations usually state whether some kind of proletarian consciousness is in the making, but that the day must still be awaited when the revolutionary potential of the working class will unfold itself.

In this genre of Left analyses that concentrate on a study of the labour process and, in which little account is taken of the broader social relations in which labour as a class is defined and defines itself, there is often a tendency to impute worker consciousness on an

5 *Ibid.* – p.165.

6 J. Depelchin – *Mozambique: 1960-1975 – Some Comments on the History of the Liberated Zones*, Centro de Estudos Africanos, Universidade Eduardo Mondlane, Maputo, 1985. (Unpub. Mimeo), pp.5-6.

7 R. Jacoby – *Dialectic of Defeat – Contours of Western Marxism* – Cambridge University Press, 1981, p.4.

8 M. Von Freyhold – *Labour Movements of Popular Struggles in Africa* – R.O.A.P.E. No. 39, 1987, p.4.

escalating scale of progressiveness. Moreover, when the single site of analysis is the workplace and the labour process, it becomes difficult for the analyst to avoid economic determinism, namely a tendency to establish a direct correlation between the ideology and actions of workers and the economic structures at a given point in time. Such an analysis has for the most part yet to move beyond the point of production to a broader conception of ideology and culture, and through this a more complex less linear conception of class formation. This tendency is particularly apparent in the postures of the Workerists in the South African debate.

Moreover, because of the uneven development of capitalism and the reproduction process, and the urban-rural totality of a worker's life process, an individual may move from peasant to proletarian, or migrant worker, and back to peasant production, in the course of one lifetime. This process in turn affects the complex cultural and ideological outlook of labour, and the forms of labour organisation, struggle and consciousness that develop. The point here is that the reflex Leftist appeal to the 'proletariat' as the fundamental social force for change needs to be tempered with a more detailed and complex analysis of its particular forms.

SOCIAL MOVEMENTS

Because of a greater realisation of the complexity of labour struggles, a new trend in terms of analysis has been to examine more broadly based social movements.⁹ In sum, such an analysis involves looking at the peasant-worker relation, and examining the relations between the 'working class' and the struggles of the 'non-proletarian' masses. This is a positive attempt to examine the greater complexity of the reproduction process, struggles, consciousness and ideological formation in Africa, and also to move away from state-centred perceptions of transformation.

This kind of analysis also serves as an important antidote to the mechanistic ways in which Marxism is sometimes conceptualised as a revolutionary strategy.¹⁰ Thus in a good deal of Left analysis there is an overly schematic conception of categories such as class, state and imperialism, which is derived from an insufficiently historical conception of such categories. Classes, for example, are set against a paradigm of the form they should be taking at particular historical moments, in a manner described in the section above on LABOUR. Taken to the extreme, such conceptions categorise the formulation of ideologies, outside of such class paradigms, as false consciousness.

In political/strategic terms, this conception translates itself into an inability to integrate Marxism into national political and cultural traditions. This is because it is assumed that 'Marxism-Leninism' is the apotheosis of working class ideology and that all other forms of national ideological struggle must be subsumed, not organically articulated, into what is perceived as a complete Marxist world view.

This perspective, in turn, generates a view of alliances between the proletariat, the peasant and sections of the petty-bourgeoisie, in which such alliances are seen as purely

9 M. Mamdani, T. Mkandawire and Wamba-dia-Wamba – *Social Movements, Social Transformation and the Struggle for Democracy in Africa* – C.O.D.E.S.R.I.A. Working Paper 1/88.

10 This part of the discussion is taken from B. Raftopoulos – *The Dar-Es-Salaam Debate – Reflections on Certain Trends in African Marxism* – Forthcoming ZIDS Working Paper.

instrumental, through which the class demands of allied classes are articulated to those of a fundamental class (the proletariat) with each group maintaining its own ideology. Here alliance means, for the most part, the subordination of the ideology and demands of allied classes, to the central paradigm of proscribed proletarian ideology, which is considered in abstract, as a wholly constituted working class ideology, instead of an ideological process that needs to be worked out in a concrete, historical and national context.

Such perspectives thus lead to a view of political alliance without hegemony, in the Gramscian sense of the word; that is an alliance that is political, expressing what is perceived as class interest at an economic level only, without also being moral and intellectual.

There are two lessons to be drawn from this analysis. Firstly, anti-imperialist alliances need to be conceived in more than just instrumental political terms, in which a leading class or party imposes its superior world views on its allies. Lasting and effective alliances are not built through such Leftist paternalism. Secondly, such formalist conceptions of vanguardism can often lead to well-meaning, progressive petty-bourgeois intellectuals adopting an extremely statist conception of the transition to socialism. This is because of a theoretical and political indisposition to an alliance based on historically and organisationally developed ideological hegemony, rather than imposed theoreticist 'truths'. In a salutary reminder of this problem, Hobsbawm has observed that:

The struggle for hegemony before, during and after the transition remains crucial in all circumstances.. Power alone, even revolutionary power, cannot replace it.¹¹

Such an appropriation of statism is easily carried out in Third World formations, where the nature of capitalist penetration has often produced weak forms of civil society.

THE STATE

This brings us to the problem of the state. The Left in Africa have grown increasingly critical of the role of the state, even the 'progressive state' in the transformation process. Shivji, for example, has criticised what he characterises as the 'developmentalist' ideology of most post-colonial African states.¹² Under the guise of this 'developmentalist' rhetoric, issues of democracy and participation are subordinated in the interests of 'national' economic development. For the working people, the terrain of politics is continuously repressed in the interests of a quest for increased production. This de-politicisation is, of course, itself a feature of state politics, as the latter seeks to maintain a monopoly over the definition of the political. The expression of such politics is either the repression of or attempted state incorporation of popular organisations. In another intervention, Shivji¹³ criticised the left for what he termed their 'entrism' position on the post-colonial state and party. That is, he has criticised the Left for believing that they can enter either the post-colonial state or party and attempt to change these organs from within. According to

11 E. J. Hobsbawm – *Gramsci and Marxist Political Theory* – In A. Showstack Sassoon (Ed) – *Approaches to Gramsci – Writers and Readers*, 1982.

12 Introduction – I. Shivji (Ed) – *The State and the Working People in Tanzania* – C.O.D.E.S.R.I.A., 1985.

13 I. Shivji – *The Politics of the Left in Africa: Towards a Self-Criticism* – Public Talk at A.A.P.S. (Zimbabwe Chapter) on 21st January, 1988 – (Unpub. Mimeo).

Shivji, this strategy is based on an unscientific understanding of the class nature of such post-colonial institutions, and the end result is that the Left itself is captured by such institutions. He, therefore, advises the Left to work for the creation of autonomous organisations for working people in civil society.

Shivji has produced an important critique of the post-colonial state and the Left's approach towards it. However, there are several points which need to be raised with regard to his analysis. Firstly, his analysis of post-colonial state ideological domination needs to be refined to portray the greater complexity of the picture.

For it could be argued that this 'developmentalist' ideology was articulated as much, and at times more, for a foreign audience of international financiers than for internal consumption. This is because of the large degree of marginalisation of most working people from the sphere of civil society, and the terrain of such articulated discourse. Post-colonial states maintain their control, not only through coercion and its concomitant lack of hegemony, but also because the dependent and inefficient nature of the post-colonial state allows people to reproduce themselves in the interstices of such inefficiency and dependency, despite as well as because of the activities and limitations of the state. This process should be distinguished from any conception of an 'uncaptured peasantry' that posits a pristine pre-capitalist presence. What this process provides is not a blanket assent to state policies or the dictates of capital. Instead what emerges is either the anomie and anonymity of the city and the apathy of certain aspects of rural social relations, or an opposition in which the everyday 'practical consciousness' of working people interprets events and their consequences through differing and contradictory ideological frameworks. Finally, it should be remembered that the hegemony of a dominating class is "not only the articulate upper level of 'ideology' nor are its forms of control only those ordinarily seen as 'manipulation' and 'indoctrination'".¹⁴ A petty-bourgeois governing class in a post-colonial state can, within the limitations of post-colonial economies, generate certain levels of consent, through its social/economic programmes, the historical memory of a recent liberation struggle, the continuing resonance of nationalism and anti-racism, or the more particularistic 'consent' of ethnic complicity.

As to Shivji's critique of the 'entrist' strategy of the Left with regard to the state and party, it is clear that he is, in important respects, correct in his criticisms.

Recently, within the Zimbabwean context, Davies has repeated this criticism of the Left as being naive and voluntarist in their attitude towards the state.¹⁵ Some qualifying remarks, however, need to be made about these criticisms. At best they represent an important reminder of the structural imperatives underlying the activities of the state. At worst, they underestimate the contradictions within the state and present the latter as something of a monolith. In addition, while this critique points to the importance of the development of autonomous, non-state organisations of working people, the analysis fails to delineate the type of relationships that such movements should establish with the state. This can in turn lead to both an underestimation of state power and the role of sections of

14 R. Williams – *Marxism and Literature* – O.U.P. 1977, p.110.

15 R. Davies – *Economic Policy, the State and the Left in Africa* – Paper given at the Zimbabwe Economics Society Conference on Southern Africa: Economic Experiences Since Independence, Lessons for South Africa and Namibia, Harare, 16-18 November, 1988.

the petty-bourgeoisie, as well as an idealisation of these autonomous organisations of working people. The critique of the statist position can result in a spurious kind of Left formalism.

IMPERIALISM

Let me now turn to imperialism. As an historical legacy and a continuing system of international linkages, imperialism has generated real constraints and limitations on development in Africa. This is almost a truism, but one that needs to be repeated in the light of criticisms from sections of the European Left, like Gavin Kitching.¹⁶ The latter has criticised the African Left for portraying imperialism as being endowed "with apparently all conquering power, total clarity and unanimity of purpose, and almost omnipotent causal potency", thus leading to a kind of fatalism on the part of the African Left. Kitching, because of his abhorrence of dependency theory, has equated the theory of imperialism with a political fatalism. It is one thing to say that in the hands of certain analysts the 'will' of imperialism appears to unfold with an ineluctable logic; it is quite another to use this premise to dismiss the very real constraints, and pressures, imposed by imperialism. Kitching's 'answer' to the problem of radical transformation is then revealed in his view that socialism in Africa must await the development of a working class in the context of a developing capitalism.

This essentially Warrenite position can best be viewed as an escape into modernity, thus eschewing the immediate problem of dealing with the real social forces at work in Africa today.

Most African radicals know the very real constraints that imperialism imposes on the social formations of their countries. They have to live and deal with those constraints on a daily basis. On a more theoretical level, as Nicos Mouzelis has pointed out, concepts such as dependency and dependent development make sense only within an "historically oriented macro-comparative approach, focusing on the major differences as well as interconnections between the capitalist trajectories of the centre and the periphery".¹⁷

CONCLUSION

The major aim of this article has been to attempt to confront some of the thorny theoretical and political issues facing the African Left today and, I believe, for the foreseeable future. It has attempted to go beyond some of the displaced, however well-intentioned mythologies of sections of the Left. This is not out of a sense of disillusion with the possibility of working people transforming their societies (though one can already envisage the apoplectic denunciations from the 'purists') but out of the conviction that if the "resources for such a journey of hope" are to be built up, then the beginning must be an analysis of what those resources really are, and not what a teleologically informed vision supposes them to be.

16 G. Kitching - Politics, Method and Evidence in the 'Kenya Debate' in H. Bernstein and B. Campbell (Eds) - *Contradictions of Accumulation in Africa* - Studies in Economy and State, Sage Publications, 1985, pp.115-152.

17 N. Mouzelis - *Sociology of Development Reflections on the Present Crisis* - Sociology, Vol. 22, No. 1, February, 1988, p.39.

We live on a continent on which those who labour are facing the prospect of an increasing cycle of disaster and decline. The very processes of reproduction are being destroyed and displaced, as the contours of the human and ecological landscape recede, with a compelling intensity, into further stages of desperation. Of course, the dramatised world of the imperialist centres already has a convention for portraying such processes, a mode of presenting, packaging and 'dealing with' African disaster. At its most insane, this convention postures in the austere, technically appropriate garb of *Structural Adjustment*, already a synonym for Western cynicism towards African poverty.

The grimace on this mask is at one end of a continuum that proceeds into the more presentable face of aid, with its avuncular demeanour. Even when dissenting youth call out for Band Aid, the logic of that dissent is that it is rapidly assimilated into the broader pressures of the world economy. Thus the conventions for responding to Africa have been set, and packaged for media appearances in the West, distanced, distorted, pathetic, and almost always misunderstood.

In the face of such conditions, it is tempting to reach for slogans, acts of faith, restatements of orthodoxies. It is less attractive to confront a set of radical tenets without the foreclosure of absolute success, a 'Marxism without guarantees'. With glasnost, perestroika and the self-critique of existing socialism, socialists are much clearer on what they do not want, than on the contours of a future socialism.



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